

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Negotiating deficiency: Exploring ethnic minority parents' narratives about encountering child welfare services in Norway

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## Abstract

Evaluating the participatory opportunities for service users within social welfare institutions is a pressing issue. In this article, we explore a group of ethnic minority parents' experiences with child welfare services (CWS) in Norway. A strong narrative theme was deficiency positioning—how lacking a Norwegian normative set of knowledge and skills challenged the parents' opportunities to participate. We analysed how deficiency positioning was perceived, negotiated, and contested in the parents' accounts, and 4 themes emerged: (a) learning to parent, (b) contesting expert knowledge, (c) learning to be a client, and (d) constructing CWS deficiency. Nancy Fraser's concept of “participatory parity” was applied to explore how current institutional structures may enable and limit parents' participation. The analysis provides insight into agencies and informants' sense-making processes as well as the diverse resources and strategies that parents draw upon in the CWS encounter. Furthermore, we argue that an interplay between a strong focus on “parenting skills” and bureaucratic and economic structures positions ethnic minority parents as deficient, thus providing powerful mechanisms for marginalization. Implications for case work and institutional levels are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

child welfare, ethnic minorities, parenting, participation, refugees

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2013, we engaged in a research project aiming to explore institutional practices in Norwegian child welfare services (CWS) from the perspectives of ethnic minority parents. One of our informants was Paul, a father of four children, who had migrated to Norway more than 10 years ago after a difficult time in a refugee camp. He vividly narrated his first encounters with CWS, expressing that he had struggled to make sense of CWS when his child was suddenly placed in care. Looking back, he evaluated the reasons for his vulnerable position in the following way:

P: At the time, you know, I did not know about the child welfare problems. How do the child welfare services work? What do they do? How can they help a family? I did not know.

M (interviewer): No, that was all new to you.

P: Yes, and they did not come and give the information. “[Paul], here

in Norway, we have the child welfare services. It functions like this, like this, like this.” They did not do that. They didn't send someone to teach me either. “[Paul], you will raise this child like this, like this.” They did not do that. [...] That is a scandal! It is not logical.

Paul's reference to the “scandal” of poor information for refugees about the mandate of Norwegian CWS can be linked to recent debates in international media where ethnic minority parents criticize Norwegian CWS, stating that these services lack cultural sensitivity and wrongfully intervene in families' lives (Skivenes, 2014). Paul's claim can also be linked to a broader debate within social work regarding cultural diversity and the competencies that social workers must possess to meet the specific needs of ethnic minority populations (Freund & Band-Winterstein, 2015; Williams, 2006).

In this article, we explore these questions from the perspective of ethnic minority parents who have encountered Norwegian CWS. We

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are particularly concerned with how institutional structures may influence ethnic minority parents' opportunities to participate in interactions with social workers.

## 1.1 | Child welfare and social justice

Across countries, CWS are mandated to improve the lives of children and families facing adversity (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). Norwegian CWS provides a wide range of preventive in-home services (e.g., parent counselling, week-end homes, support people, and leisure time activities), as well as out-of-home placements for children perceived to be "at risk." Approximately 80% of families consent to the services provided, although many families experience that their opportunity to reject interventions is limited (Studsrød, Willumsen, & Ellingsen, 2014). Professional discretion plays a key role in social workers' risk assessments (Berrick, Peckover, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2015), and decisions are informed by ideas of "proper parenting" and what is "best for children." Such ideas are constantly changing in relation to historical, political, and cultural contexts and are typically taken for granted and viewed as universal or neutral by professionals (see, e.g., Williams & Soydan, 2005; Ylvisaker, Rugkåsa, & Eide, 2015).

Vagli (2009) and Erstad (2015) argued that Norwegian welfare workers are guided by a western, middle-class perspective on parenting within an individualistic notion of personhood and a psychodynamic frame of reference. In line with this argument, Hollekim, Anderssen, and Daniel (2016) suggested that proper parenting in Norway is construed as child focused and dialogue based, promoting children's rights and renouncing violence or force in child rearing. Research thus indicates that Norwegian parenting norms are in line with what Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, and Macvarish (2014) refer to as "intensive parenting," which is linked to a historical shift in Western societies where children are construed "as more vulnerable to risks impacting their physical and emotional development than ever before" (Faircloth, 2014, p. 26). Good parents are expected to invest large amounts of time, energy, and money in their children to avoid risk and ensure optimal developmental conditions. Lee et al. (2014) argued that these norms have developed parallel to intensified family policies that allow experts to define the skills that parents must possess. However, parents with ethnic minority backgrounds might have different parenting norms (Jaysane-Darr, 2013) and lack the financial resources needed to meet the required standards (Berry, 2013; Staer & Bjørknes, 2015). The norm of intensive parenting thus risks enforcing a social hierarchy where ethnic minority parents are marginalized.

Fraser (2003) argued that social injustices in modern welfare states stem from cultural patterns and economic structures that systematically marginalize individuals and groups in terms of participation. Social justice can therefore be achieved only by (a) critically investigating institutional practices with regard to persons or groups' participatory opportunities and (b) dismantling obstacles to participation, namely, structures of misrecognition (normative injustices) and maldistribution (economic injustices). Thus, social justice can be evaluated according to the concept of parity in participation. We argue that Fraser's framework is useful for exploring parents' experiences with CWS because it allows for a critical investigation of the participatory

conditions within this specific context of interaction (Hölscher, 2014; Kojan, 2016).

Research has identified that cultural gaps, language barriers, distrust, and bureaucratic structures might hamper service provision to ethnic minority populations (Bø, 2014; Križ & Skivenes, 2015; Skivenes, Barn, Križ, & Pösö, 2014). Parents' perspectives only partially inform the current knowledge base (see, e.g., Dumbrell, 2009), which is concerning because minority service user experiences are often invisible to majority populations (Serrant-Green, 2010). In a previous article (Fylkesnes, Nygren, Bjørknes, & Iversen, 2015), we thoroughly analysed ethnic minority parents' accounts of their CWS encounters to identify themes across the dataset. "Lacking skills and knowledge" was identified as a common theme at both a semantic and latent level. For the purpose of this article, we therefore explore this theme in depth. To explore sense-making processes and unpack the complex interactional and contextual processes that come into play simultaneously when parents encounter CWS, we draw on insights from narrative analysis.

## 1.2 | The aim of this article

In this article, we critically explore how institutional practices may position ethnic minority parents as "lacking," that is, deficient, with regard to skills and knowledge. All parents encountering CWS are likely to experience deficiency positioning in some form. Our aim is to identify specificities related to ethnic minority parents' positioning and how it affects their opportunities for participation. Specifically, we ask: In what ways do CWS institutional practices position ethnic minority parents as lacking and how is this positioning perceived, negotiated, and contested in parents' narratives?

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger PhD research project investigating ethnic minority service users' perspectives on CWS in Norway. By applying the concept of ethnic minority (rather than immigrant or refugee), we emphasize how institutional power structures produce inequalities related to ethnicity (Fraser, 2009).

Our methodological approaches were inspired by narrative research and constructivist perspectives, as we perceive stories to be "social artefacts telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or a group" (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). Individuals make sense of their experiences through narration, as events and ideas are organized and evaluated by drawing on both individual and socio-cultural resources (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Service users' narratives about their CWS encounters are therefore valuable sources of knowledge, reflecting both personal agencies and institutional structures (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2017). The project was approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Official, and ethics guidelines were followed.

### 2.1 | Recruitment and informants

To recruit informants, we distributed information leaflets printed in five different languages (Norwegian, English, Somali, Arabic, and

French) throughout voluntary organizations, child welfare agencies, schools, health centres, welfare agencies, and our professional network.

The sample consisted of 11 parents who were interviewed by the first author in 2014 and 2016. All informants were refugees from nine different countries on the African continent and in the Middle East. Four were men and seven were women of approximately 20–45 years of age. They had one to seven children and had resided in Norway for 2–17 years. In three of the families, the parents were married or living together. One informant held a steady job, one was seeking work, one was a domestic worker, and the remainder were students (six attended language or introductory courses for immigrants, and two were undergraduate students). The majority lived in public housing situated in socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods in two large cities in Norway. All but one of the informants had received various in-home services from CWS, such as parent counselling, weekend homes, and economic support. The children of two of the informants were placed in foster care at the time of the interview, and seven had experienced emergency care orders.

## 2.2 | Semistructured interviews

Interviews were conducted at a place of the informants' choosing, in the informants' home, at the university, or in a café. Translators were used in dialogue with three parents. The selected language for the remaining interviews was Norwegian (four), English (two), and French (one). To facilitate the informants' voices and to trigger the telling of stories, the interviewer emphasized that we first and foremost wished to know what was important to the informant regarding his or her contact with CWS. Key questions guiding probes were (a) contact with CWS over time, (b) relationships with caseworkers and opportunities for participation, and (c) issues related to ethnic minority positioning (e.g., values in child rearing and language barriers). Eight of the informants agreed to participate in one follow-up interview that served the dual aim of building trust and exploring themes of special interest from the initial interview. Each interview lasted 50–150 min. All interviews were used in the analysis for this article.

As researchers and coconstructors of knowledge, our positions as White, middle-class academics have both enabled and limited our scopes of action and interpretations and brought forth ethical dilemmas related to being representatives of the "White majority" researching the "ethnic minority" (Serrant-Green, 2010). A reflexive and critical approach was followed through the research process, as we kept a research log and held group discussions to identify bias and issues influencing our understanding and the storytelling context (Riessman, 2008). To ensure informed consent, information about the purpose of the research, role of the researcher, and confidentiality was emphasized to the informants.

## 2.3 | Analysis

To analyse the interview data, we applied a content and narrative thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). First, all transcripts were analysed with particular attention to how "lack of knowledge and skills" was perceived and made sense of in each

informant's narrative. The term *narrative* refers to segments of talk about "being lacking" where events and ideas were organized sequentially and evaluated. At this analytical stage, we interpreted that negotiation and contestation, strategies for addressing this perceived "lack," were key narrative themes. Last, themes across informants' stories were created from the data, as is characteristic of a thematic narrative approach (Riessman, 2008).

To convey our analytical points and give thorough attention to context and complexity, we chose to present two examples under each theme. This allowed us to include longer dialogue transcripts to illustrate how ideas and events were linked and evaluated in the informants' storytelling. We strive to provide as much context as possible without compromising the informants' confidentiality. Information about ethnic background and some details about family structure, events, and personal characteristics have been left out. Regarding length of residence in Norway, we distinguish between "less than 5 years," "5 to 1 years," and "more than 10 years." The terms *parents* and *informants* are used interchangeably to refer to the study participants.

## 2.4 | Negotiating deficiency: four narrative themes

The informants' accounts were diverse. Some informants provided positive accounts about the help that they had received from CWS and their contact with social workers, whereas others gave mostly critical accounts. Parents who had experienced out-of-home placements shared more emotional and ambivalent stories than parents who had exclusively experienced in-home interventions. However, a common theme across narratives was a notion of lacking a Norwegian normative set of knowledge and skills regarding both parenting norms (how to parent) and bureaucratic norms (how to be a client) as they encountered CWS. The introductory excerpt of Paul, who criticized CWS for not providing him with the information and education that he needed, is an example of this common theme. We refer to this as deficiency positioning, entailing both processes of ascription (issues that were construed as concerning by caseworkers, e.g., parenting practices) and self-ascription (issues that the parents themselves defined as challenging, e.g., lacking knowledge of the welfare system).

Embedded in the narratives, we found accounts of how the informants made sense of, negotiated, and contested deficiency positioning. The concept negotiation is tricky in this context because it could imply a process by which two opposing and equally empowered parties "compromise." We acknowledge that relationships between parents and social workers are highly asymmetrical—even when the encounter is perceived as positive. Even so, we view the concept of negotiation as helpful in exploring multiple agencies and power relationships.

In the following analysis, we explore how deficiency positioning was perceived, negotiated, and contested by considering four narrative themes: (a) learning to parent, (b) contesting expert knowledge, (c) learning to be a client, and (d) constructing CWS deficiency. First, we present our empirical analysis and discuss some key issues that these themes raise. Critical perspectives on intensive parenting (Lee et al., 2014) and participatory parity (Fraser, 2003) serve as key analytical lenses. We then discuss the implications of our analysis for

participatory conditions within Norwegian CWS, limitations of the study, and implications for practice.

## 2.5 | Learning to parent

The first narrative theme, learning to parent, relates to our informants' accounts of acquiring new knowledge and skills through contact with CWS and of changing their parenting practices and/or views as a result of advice or information provided during an encounter with CWS. This theme was present in Hannah's account. Hannah had lived in Norway for more than 5 years and gave birth to a son when she was 18 years old. In discussing why she came into contact with CWS, she said:

*They helped me because it was my first child; [the help was] about which clothes and which diapers I should use. [...] They helped me a lot because when I looked at my baby, I was very scared because he was very small and he had this belly button [that had not healed up]. [...] And I didn't know how to shower him and such, and they helped me. Yeah. When I held my son, I got all weak (indicating with her body language that her limbs went feeble).*

Hannah linked her "deficiency" and need for CWS to her young age and lack of experience. The advice that she received was constructed as helpful, as it provided her with the skills she needed as a young mother. We followed up by asking if Hannah typically agreed with the advice that she received from CWS, and she replied:

*Yes, I agree. [...] Before, I had this problem that my child threw his toys around. I told [the CWS counsellors] that my child threw things around, and they said, "You should do like this, this, this." Then, I tried it out. If something is good for me, if it works after trying it once, twice, I tell them, "Yes, thank you very much." If it doesn't work I tell them, "No, it doesn't work, you have to find another way."*

Hannah expressed that the CWS counsellors entered into a dialogue and took her knowledge and perspectives (about her child and everyday challenges) seriously. In this perspective, Hannah described being recognized and enabled in participation (Fraser, 2003). The narrative suggests a relative consensus between Hannah and her counsellors. To explore the topic further, we then asked Hannah whether she had any reflections regarding the differences between Norway and her homeland in terms of parent-child relationships.

H: Yes, it is very different. My culture, I don't like everything in my culture. Not everything, but some things I like, and I will let [my son] get that. [...]. Until now, I haven't wanted him to eat pork or things I don't like. But when he is big he will know what is different in my country and he can.... Yes, I am a very democratic mother. (laughs)  
M: Democratic mother? (laughs along)

H: My culture is not so good for children because when we are children, two or three years old, we can do what we want. [...] Children can do what they want.

M: Run around and do what they want.

H: Yes, but when we are grown up, the father decides everything. The mother decides. The grandmother decides. I don't like this about my culture. But in Norway, it is not like that. When he is a child, you will help him. Also, when he grows up, [you will help him], but he does not need that. You are open. That is not how it was for me [in my culture]. I like this culture best.

Hannah endorsed parenting norms in Norway and viewed them as child-centric, dialogue based, helpful, and providing the necessary limits for (small) children. She positioned herself as democratic and linked this position to Norwegian parental norms; however, Hannah simultaneously positioned parenting practices in her homeland as authoritarian and insensitive to children's needs. A "right way" linked to CWS, and "Norwegian culture" emerged and was contrasted with the "the wrong way" of the homeland.

We found a similar pattern of narration about "Norwegian" versus "homeland" parenting practices in Beth's account. Beth arrived in Norway more than 10 years ago. At the time of the interview, she was a single mother of three children. Several years ago, Beth and her husband were offered parent counselling.

B: It was in contact with CWS in [place], in the beginning, that my husband and I took a course for parents. It was like ... you should talk with the children and have contact, eye contact. Touch the body, and talk in a way that the children see you and understand. That was when I learned to play with children. In [my home country], people don't think about sitting on the floor.

M: Nobody does that?

B: Nobody thinks like that. It is not because people would say "that is not ...." But it is just that nobody has this thought that this is possible. There are no such thoughts in your head. Children should play by themselves and so on. But here, in Norway, we see good results when you do it. It builds better contact, a lot of positives ... the children are happy, they smile and so on. I think that if parents want what is best for their children .... What parents want their children to be sad and sorry and so on? Maybe if you are a bit nuts. But if you think in a right way, then you want your children to smile every day. They should laugh. You can talk together and have good contact and so on.

Similar to Hannah, Beth expressed that her encounters with CWS provided her with important information and skills. The narrative theme draws our attention to parents' experience of contact with CWS as empowering. Refugee parents face complex challenges in exile, for example, adjusting to new norms and expectations, dealing with loss and trauma, learning a new language, and facing discrimination. CWS can support parents in this process and provide the contextual knowledge that parents need to position themselves within a legitimate parenting discourse. In this perspective, the analytical theme learning to parent uncovers structural arrangements within CWS that enable parents' participation. At the caseworker level, Hannah's account is in line with a comprehensive body of research stating that social workers' relational skills are positively linked to ethnic minority service users' satisfaction (Chand & Thoburn, 2005; Fylkesnes & Netland, 2013). Hannah and Beth's accounts also reflect how different ideas of parenting are



negotiated within the CWS context. We argue that learning to parent, as described by our informants, referred to acquiring skills in line with the concept of Lee et al. (2014) of intensive parenting. A hierarchy of knowledge with a right way of caring for children (expert led, child centred, and dialogue based) as opposed to the negative ways of the homeland (tacit, insensitive, and authoritarian) was construed.

## 2.6 | Contesting expert knowledge

A second narrative theme, contesting expert knowledge, relates to parents' accounts of questioning and resisting Norwegian parenting norms. For example, Paul expressed that CWS were critical of his parenting methods; he was too controlling of his daughter and was advised to give her more freedom of choice, for example, about her clothing. He elaborated his views by saying the following:

*P: In [my homeland], we don't have child welfare services, but the children are very polite. This is because the child knows if I do this or that, I will be punished. So, the child has limits. [...] In child rearing, you can slap your child, you can do something like that. But that does not mean you don't love your child. You love your child, but you have to discipline him. Give a direction. [...] You can't tell the child to do what he wants. Then you destroy the child because the child does not know anything. It is the parent who is responsible for educating the child. But, first, you have to get to know the child. My child, what is he? Is he a technician? Military? [...]*

Norwegian parenting norms, promoting children's autonomy, dialogue, and non-violence in parenting, are contested in Paul's narrative. He moreover expressed that by not adhering to such parental norms, he was positioned as "not loving" his child. As in Hannah and Beth's accounts, a hierarchy of knowledge was constructed positioning Paul to be deficient as a father.

We also found that the topic of contesting expert knowledge was salient in Angelica's account. Angelica was a single mother of one child at the time of the interview and had resided in Norway for more than 10 years. Before migrating to Norway, she had been the caregiver of several children. CWS, however, were concerned that she was physically disciplining her child. Her child was placed in care for some time, and she was offered parent counselling when they were reconciled.

*So, I went to counselling, right. So, I worked with them even though I did not want to go there. Because, even though ... I just went there because I didn't want them to say "We offered her counselling and so on, but she refuses and she doesn't want help." That is why I was there. And then I was there, and I have my competencies. I have my experience. I know what I know, right? And to sit with people who don't know me .... Sit with people who have another cultural view and way of doing things, right? And she tells me? Someone who has raised a lot of children? And you have only one child that is yours, just one that you are concerned with. Not others. You don't care about others. So what can I*

*actually learn from you? [...] Because those caseworkers were young. Just finished high school, just finished college, right? They have the papers and theories. But me, I have no papers. I have no theory. I don't know the language. I have lived a [number of] years, and I have a lot of experience with children, with people, with all kinds of things.*

Angelica expressed that she attended counselling to show CWS that she was willing to be helped. She "played along" to avoid CWS intervention (disguised compliance). Angelica's knowledge (based on her age, experience, and cultural views) was not valued by caseworkers.

Paul and Angelica's narratives indicate that certain kinds of expert knowledge about children's needs and parenting are non-negotiable in the CWS context. Parents who do not feel resonance with these value structures feel devalued and misrecognized, marginalized as participants. Comparative research indicates that caseworkers are guided by a universalistic perspective of children's needs, that is, a view that children's needs can be met with the same measures irrespective of cultural background (Williams & Soydan, 2005). Križ and Skivenes (2010) argued that in the Norwegian context, a potential consequence of this perspective is the use of an instructive approach by which caseworkers inform families about "Norwegian parental standards" rather than initiating dialogue with parents. Thus, the norm of intensive parenting, which views expert knowledge within a developmental psychological framework as "true," runs the risk of hampering caseworkers' relational work with refugee parents.

## 2.7 | Learning "to be a client"

A third narrative theme, learning to be a client, relates to informants' negotiation of institutional norms. Therefore, we interpreted that negotiating deficiency concerned positioning oneself not only as a "good parent" but also as a "good client."

When Abdi, a married father of two small children who had lived in Norway for less than 5 years, received a letter from CWS, he feared that his children would be taken from him. He contacted a friend who had lived in Norway for several years and who had some experience from working for CWS.

*He's my real friend. He told me "Don't be afraid of [CWS] [...] Answer the question, cool down, answer the question, cool down, don't talk like someone who is afraid. Why are you afraid? You have a ... you are a parent, don't [be afraid]."*

The importance of learning how to behave in a trustworthy fashion was also a topic in Beth's narrative. Beth expressed that she was initially frustrated with her contact with CWS; caseworkers defined her as a bad mother regardless of what she said or did to prove otherwise.

*B: [...] When I got a lawyer, she told me: "When you talk to CWS, however difficult your situation is and they don't believe you, you have to be calm. You have to talk slowly" and so on. Because where I come from, if you speak honestly you should express that. You can't*

talk about things that are emotional if you talk like this (displaying a serious, motionless facial expression), like you don't show emotions.

M: You have to show emotions when you ...?

B: When you talk. So, I had this way of explaining, about showing emotions that I was hurting.

M: To show you really meant it.

B: Yes. But, you don't do that in Norway. Whatever pain you are feeling, you must be calm when you explain it. Don't express pain or anger for what has happened to you. You have to be calm. If you show [caseworkers] that you are angry, you are crazy.

In both Beth and Abdi's narratives, certain norms regarding how a good client should behave in the CWS context were construed (keeping calm, not displaying emotions, and being in control). Beth expressed that she had positioned herself not only as a "bad client" but also as a "bad mother" when she displayed her emotions. Abdi expressed that his friend's advice about how to behave helped him position himself as a good father. Certain skills and resources related to "clienting" are thus linked to participatory outcomes in the informants' accounts. On the one hand, these narratives reflect Norwegian cultural norms of conduct within the CWS context. On the other hand, a body of research has shown how the bureaucratic context shapes client-social workers interactions (Egelund, 1997; Evans, 2016). Within a frame of economic scarcity, social workers are expected to realize complex and often contradictory aims. As a consequence, clients who are perceived as "easy to please" and worthy of help may be prioritized, whereas persons who are perceived as difficult and unworthy may be marginalized (Egelund, 1997).

## 2.8 | Constructing CWS deficiency

The fourth narrative theme, constructing CWS deficiency, relates to the parents' accounts of questioning the practices and interventions of CWS. We found that this theme was salient in Simon's narrative. Simon, who had resided in Norway for less than 5 years, first encountered CWS when his daughter was abruptly placed in a foster home. Because his citizenship was not "clear," he was not registered as her father in the Norwegian bureaucratic system, and CWS did not accept his claims to care for the child. Simon stated that he did not know the system and therefore did not know how to convince CWS of his fatherhood.

S: Because they were the ones who took the child, they should have given me the necessary information. [...] But I got all kinds of information from the lady in the foster home. They placed [my daughter] there, but she sensed that it took a long time, too many appointments. She was the one who advised me. She started advising me and [the caseworkers]. She said that if you want things to progress, you have to take a DNA test. Because it was only the mother who had legal custody. I told [CWS] that I was her father, but there were no papers written.

M: Right, there were no papers.

S: But, [CWS] could have told me, "Ok, if this is your daughter, you must take a DNA test." They should have informed me. It was the [foster mother] that both informed me and advised me. Therefore, I say that without her help, it could have taken .... Even though they

would have given my child back to me in the end, it could have taken many years. Yes, it could have. They must inform people of what they should do.

Simon expressed that the lack of information and advice from CWS could have led to very negative consequences for himself and his daughter. His daughter's foster mother, however, provided him with important factual knowledge and gave voice to his concerns by supporting him in the encounter. Her help enabled his participation and prevented an act of injustice. Constructing CWS deficiency was also a theme in Fatima's account. Fatima had lived in Norway for more than 10 years and had several years of experience with CWS. She had initially contacted CWS at the time when she was expecting her third child. She was a single mother with a heavy care burden and limited money. She also had a son who experienced challenges in school. Her husband was in and out of their lives. She asked CWS for help with coping with the challenges of everyday life.

*I got help, and [CWS] came. But, actually, I got a lot of bad help, you can say. A lot of young people came. So, they didn't have the help we needed. They apologised directly, said "We are sorry, but we don't have anyone that can come." So, some days I was all alone, and it was very difficult, and the help couldn't come and they didn't even have help either. [...] I didn't have family; I had no friends, nothing. I sat 24 hours with my children. I said: What? Am I a bad mother when I am sitting with my children? I must be a perfect mother, actually. Right? But they always found something wrong with me.*

Fatima questioned CWS' evaluation of her as a bad mother by pointing to deficiencies in service provision. CWS failed to do "their job" of supporting her and the children and were therefore (partially) accountable for the children's challenges. Fatima considered CWS' expectations of her as unclear. She did not link her challenges to her ethnic background but, rather, to her heavy care burden and limited economic resources. Interventions provided by CWS were not helpful and thus did not achieve the overall goal of welfare services—to enable children and families' participation in wider society.

## 3 | DISCUSSION

Our analysis explored how deficiency positioning was perceived, negotiated, and contested in the parents' narratives through the following four narrative themes: (a) learning to parent, (b) contesting expert knowledge, (c) learning to be a client, and (d) constructing child welfare deficiency. In the following section, we discuss the value and implications of our analysis for research and practice.

Our analysis sheds light on parents' agency as well as the complex resources that parents utilize when encountering CWS. Our analysis challenges the perception that refugee parents are passive receivers of services. In a narrative perspective, deficiency positioning did not solely refer to the work involved in navigating a disempowered position; it was also a position from which parents could make sense of struggles they experienced encountering CWS and formulate critiques.

Our analysis, however, also raises concerns whether the quality of service provided to ethnic minority families may hinge on parents' own resources (network, language, and knowledge of systems) and negotiation competencies. Many refugee families encounter CWS at times when they are experiencing high levels of migratory stress and are struggling with uncertainty regarding citizenship. These factors may negatively influence parents' negotiation capacities, thus rendering ethnic minority parents particularly vulnerable as participants.

Additionally, our analysis provides valuable knowledge of how institutional structures may hamper ethnic minority families' opportunities to participate. In relation to Fraser's (2003) cultural dimension of injustice, a hierarchy of knowledge emerged as the norms of intensive parenting constituted a referential standard by which parents were evaluated. Refugee parents' "otherness" was thus constructed as a pivot point, explaining the challenges that parents faced and why they were marginalized in terms of participation. In regard to Fraser's (2003) economic dimension of injustice, scarce resources may render ethnic minority service users particularly vulnerable. In the last decade, we have observed a shift in Norwegian CWS towards greater use of parental counselling and decreased use of interventions addressing families' socio-economic situations, such as financial support, child care, and weekend homes (Christiansen et al., 2015). Interestingly, the socio-economic demographic of the CWS population has not changed over the same time frame. The current shift towards interventions addressing parents' skills rather than socio-economic situations might be an indication of what Fraser conceptualizes as displacement: Injustices grounded in the economic order of society are overlooked when cultural explanatory models are overemphasized. Of the children living in poverty in Norway, approximately 50% have ethnic minority backgrounds (Statistics Norway, 2016). The current focus on "parenting" as a skill and the displacement of economic factors that forcefully produce inequalities may have particularly grave consequences for families with ethnic minority backgrounds (Fraser, 2003; Ylvisaker et al., 2015).

### 3.1 | Implications for research, practice, and concluding remarks

Fraser (2009) developed her theoretical framework in her later works to encompass the distinct ways that political arrangements (decision-making processes and citizenship) produce inequalities. To our knowledge, there is scarce knowledge regarding how ethnic minority voices are included and heard when legislation and policy are developed within the field of CWS. Hence, enabling refugee and ethnic minority parents' participation in CWS might demand further research into the current representation of ethnic minorities in such institutional bodies as a point of departure for evaluating and potentially reforming their structures. Given the highly gendered nature of parenting norms and the economic strains many ethnic minority parents face, future research should also investigate how gender and class come into play within CWS (Ylvisaker et al., 2015).

In conclusion, we argue that the interplay between a cultural script of intensive parenting as well as bureaucratic and economic structures may provide powerful mechanisms for marginalizing refugee parents in social interactions with CWS. One implication at a casework level is

that social workers must activate their critical and reflexive competence, as well as their skills, to identify how institutional structures interact with and position ethnic minority families and to address potential inequalities. At a structural level, current arrangements may require transformation in order to ensure that ethnic minority families have equal opportunities to participate. Institutional reforms that are related to the cultural, economic, and representational dimensions of CWS must take the effects on children's participatory conditions into consideration. If these issues are not addressed, CWS arrangements risk reproducing marginalization and discrimination.

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